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LOUIS NORMAN

## Rossellini's Case Histories for Moral Education

*"Things are where they are, why bother to rearrange them?"*

*"But if one wishes to find truth, one must have a moral viewpoint. A critical judgment is a necessity. I cannot let myself go off aimlessly and, when I wish to go to Orly, wind up at Le Bourget."*

—ROSSELLINI INTERVIEW, *Cahiers du Cinéma*,  
1963

Since 1963, Roberto Rossellini has devoted his energies to producing historical films for educational television. The purpose of what he terms his "didactic films" is simple: to transmit the truth of the past to those who will make the future. "I do not seek personal glory, I wish only to be useful." But one should not imagine that Rossellini has abandoned his former concerns and methods. In fact he has merely carried into the past the passion for authenticity which distinguishes his best work. In his new undertaking he continues to use the real event to isolate and promote ethical values. In this respect all his films are didactic: *Open City* depends on the tension between *is* and *might be* quite as much as *Augustine of Hippo*. The television series builds up a complex picture of Western man: his strengths, his weaknesses, his important accomplishments, his problematic future. Certain of the films concentrate on periods and movements—*The Age of Iron, Man's Struggle for Survival, The Age of Cosimo de' Medici*—while others emphasize individual initiative and responsibility. Four of the latter group—*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV, Socrates, Blaise Pascal*, and *Augustine of Hippo*—provide not only a measure of Rossellini's latest achievement, but demonstrate his continuing preoccupation with the moral basis of cinema and the moral purpose of life.

Real events have always inspired Rossellini,

as *Open City* and *Paisan* clearly indicate. But the same box-office obligations which eventually decided him to abandon commercial cinema make his early films overly dependent on narrative conventions. The foreignness of Italian life and speech so fascinated critics that they failed for a long time to realize that many early neorealist films, and particularly those of Rossellini, are basically melodramas. The characters of *Open City* and, to a lesser degree, of *Paisan*, are unmistakably stereotypic. We can almost see labels: heroic Resistance leader, sadistic Nazi, disillusioned Offizier, courageous Priest, and so on. Perhaps nowhere is the melodramatic quality more apparent than in the musical accompaniment which seeks to intensify our response to the action. Such emotional manipulation now seems excessive. Certainly this is one of the reasons for the musical restraint of the television films.

Rossellini characteristically orients his films in two directions. On the one hand he seeks to capture the essence of reality; on the other he strives to organize "things" into a coherent structure which not only states the problem, but suggests a solution. The desire to reconcile the contrary impulsions of realism and moral optimism early led him naturally to historical subjects which provide a reality already infused with ethical values. *Little Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) and *Viva l'Italia* (1960) foreshadow the dominant stylistic concerns of the television films: dedramatization and demythification. These complementary techniques aim at rediscovering the natural simplicity of truth: the one does to dramatic stylization what the other does to historical exaggeration. Dedramatization is, in some respects, a standard Rossellini technique. Partly an effect of using non-actors, it emphasizes content over form, spontaneity over reflection. In the treatment of historical subjects it

inevitably builds up so untraditional a picture that by itself it is a powerful means of demythification.

*Little Flowers of St. Francis* is the story of one man and a few followers who tried to eliminate hatred and division by insisting on love. The humility and self-imposed poverty of the Franciscans make the film perfect for nonprofessional actors. Francis appears as a simple, unprepossessing man of limited means but great faith. Organizing the story as a succession of anecdotes—*fioritti*—brings the film close to the narrative development of the television films. Unlike the later films, however, *Little Flowers of St. Francis* builds to an hilarious climax: in the tyrant's camp Brother Ginepro demonstrates, by converting the barbarians, the miraculous effect of love and humility on ordinary men. The film is intended not only to portray the saint, but to revitalize his teachings.

A different impulse animates *Viva l'Italia*. Made to commemorate the centenary of Garibaldi's conquest of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the film exudes the joy of liberation. The surge of Garibaldi's volunteer army across Sicily and up toward Rome has the inherent dramatic appeal of a great military exploit. For sheer excitement nothing matches the colorful explosion of the battle of Calatafimi. The Pancinor zoom lens, so important in all the films after 1959, plays an essential part in conveying the battle's turmoil. The camera, slowly zooming in and out as it pans carefully over the terrain, seems to unroll the conflict in front of us in much the same way, no doubt, that the tapestry at Bayeux spread Hastings before visitors to the abbey. The movement of the camera encountering contrary movements by the groups of tiny soldiers leaves us with the impression of swirls of activity spreading across the face of an immense hill.

Using a well known professional actor to play Garibaldi would seem contrary to Rossellini's desire to demythify history. But the dramatic ease and restrained power which Renzo Ricci brings to his characterization allow a new insight into the nature of the man. Ricci's portrayal refuses the heroic view of Garibaldi as the hammer striking the enemy, and gives in-

stead a more satisfying picture of Garibaldi as the fulcrum which enables a small force to dislodge a large weight. In a sense the film is a study of charisma. Whether fighting or planning or just conversing, Garibaldi commands attention and elicits admiration. He encourages his men, he steadies them, he inspires them. But it is their efforts, the work of the many, which accomplish his projects. Although Rossellini takes care to note Garibaldi's gout and his need for reading glasses, these details humanize the man without explaining or diminishing his hold over us. His modest appearance belies an inner power which finds objective expression in the success of the entire expedition.

Demythification is not solely a matter of actor selection. Ricci's dramatic skill keeps Garibaldi within human limits; Rossellini's direction emphasizes the traits which bring him into the line of men like Don Pietro, Manfredi, and Saint Francis. As in the television films, Rossellini achieves this new portrait by retaining the facts and shifting either the context or the point of view. Conventional staging looks backward from success to undertaking, presenting events as inevitable: Rossellini's looks forward. Restoring the temporal continuity of the past in this fashion helps combat the *post hoc* reasoning which restricts historical understanding. The depiction of Garibaldi's famous "*Qui si fa l'Italia o si muore*" ("Here we will unify Italy or die") at the battle of Calatafimi is an outstanding example of Rossellini's method. Garibaldi delivers the historic words as little more than an offhand remark as he and a group of soldiers prepare to move off toward the battle. This treatment runs counter to the heroic tradition, but such simplicity brings out Garibaldi's resolution and firmness in the face of uncertainty, and this is probably a truer picture of the moment than the smug bravado of the standard version. It is, after all, the winning battle which immortalizes the words, not the immortal words which win the battles.

In the television films, now relatively free of commercial obligations, Rossellini builds a style based on the primacy of the fact: he dedramatizes the action—and demythifies history—by factualizing it. Putting aside previous narrative

PASCAL



conventions, he concentrates on the short episode, the anecdote. As in the first important historical form, the chronicle, the didactic films deliver the past in regulated, almost self-contained parcels. In *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, dramatic use of the rivalry between Louis and Fouquet creates a greater resemblance to typical historical narrative than in the other films, but the film is still composed of moments placed next to each other: doctors visit Cardinal Mazarin, the King arises, the King speaks to his ministers, the King dines. Each scene is like a fragment from a mosaic: we cannot understand completely until all the pieces are in place.

The same moral impetus which insists on factual accuracy causes Rossellini to prefer non-professional actors. They are to reality what the fact is to history, and they provide the key to his didactic style. Beginning with *Open City*, where their use is associated with a desire for realism, non-actors have been an important feature of Rossellini's cinema. Precisely because they are unfamiliar to us, non-actors create an impression of reality which the professional actor cannot: like the faces we pass in the street, they appear once and then vanish. The added realism makes us more receptive to the message of the story. But Rossellini aims beyond realism. He seeks a cinema of authenticity and truth, one which establishes a symbiotic relation between film and reality. It is primarily because the actions of non-actors possess the weight and accuracy of personal experience that Rossellini prefers them. Their naturalness, however

gauche, is more truthful than the studied expressiveness of the professional actor.

Although non-actors often pose serious dramatic problems (the failure to resolve such problems limits the effectiveness of many *cinéma-vérité* productions), Rossellini has always shown himself not only willing but delighted to take advantage of unforeseen occurrences or to draw on individual mannerisms in devising a scene. This spontaneity helps give his cinema the moral base of authenticity it requires. In the television films, the inexperience of the actors engenders a *mise-en-scène* so deliberate and so methodical it might more appropriately be termed *mise-en-place*. But under Rossellini's guidance this stolidity often achieves a stateliness which allows the past to unfold itself before us fresh and new. In *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* the measured pace is a perfect vehicle to convey both the gloom of Mazarin's death and the implacability of the King's political will. By eliminating dramatic exaggeration Rossellini transfers emphasis from drama to fact, and creates works which appeal to the intellect rather than directly to the emotions. Simplifying and slowing down the *mise-en-scène* clarifies the action, giving the films an essentially Brechtian tone. Moreover the simple staging facilitates filming in long sequences, in which Rossellini's zoom technique combines emotional close-ups and temporal continuity. This union is most effective in *Blaise Pascal*, where the camera, zooming slowly in and out, isolates or integrates the individual: it is as if we were going over a

large painting with a magnifying glass. The telephoto close-ups add to the sensation of flatness and stasis.

These innovations seem motivated in part to guard against pre-judgments. Every historical character has a physical personality which exists quite apart from the tendentious views of traditional accounts. Demythification means not only reducing the great to human proportions, but restoring the maligned to human dignity. Rossellini takes great precautions to avoid both out-of-hand condemnation and hyperbolic praise. Even Xanthippe emerges rather well, considering the proverbial attitudes toward her.

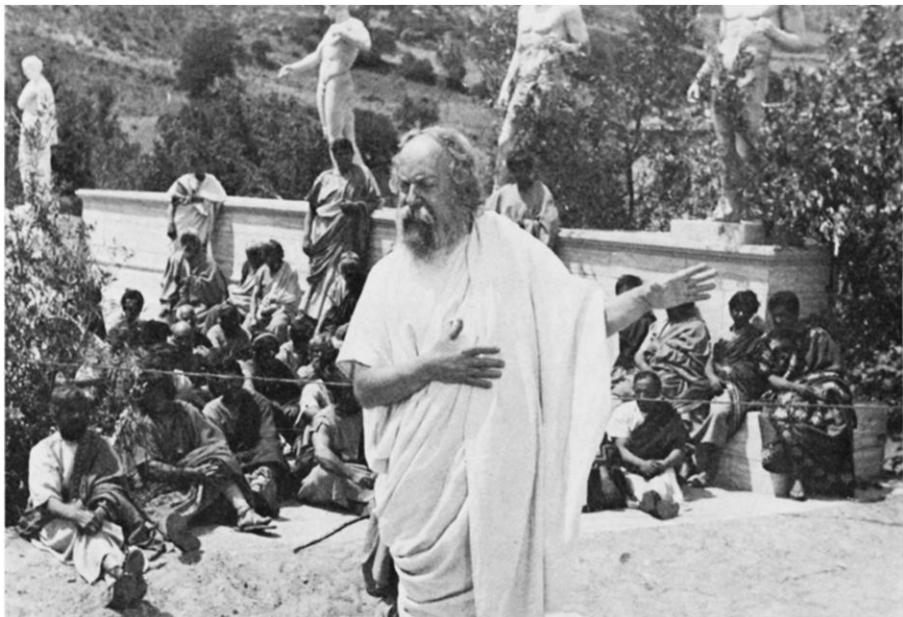
Their flat, static narrative often makes the didactic films disappointing as drama, but paradoxically their dramatic weakness is their moral and educational strength. They seem to refuse our attention, and this refusal compels us to watch even more carefully. The restrained pace and factual precision encourage us to believe that Rossellini is merely *presenting* the material—in the best tradition of the objective, detached historian—and allowing us to learn for ourselves. In fact he puts nothing before us which is not related to the moral and historical lessons he wishes to communicate. In *Blaise Pascal* the treatment of the extraordinary vision which reconverted Pascal to Catholicism demonstrates perfectly his procedure. The camera pans about the room, slowly uncovering a disorder of details which suggest a recent struggle, as Pascal rereads, in a voice at the limit of physical endurance, the anguished summary (which was found sewn into the lining of his coat after his death) of his emotional state. Restaging the recording of the vision, instead of attempting to portray the vision itself, retains intact the sensorv mystery of Pascal's experience while rendering the essence of its effect. But lacking knowledge of the full significance of the moment—the staging speaks completely only to those with prior awareness—we find ourselves wanting to know more. The film thus sends us to books, and the books will send us back to the film. By encouraging questions the film opens out into our own world. Rossellini forces us to look—and see—for ourselves. We cannot assimilate the words and images without taking an

active part in the process. The didactic works make education our responsibility.

Although the use of real people and real places has naturally led critics to consider these films documentaries, they are better understood as slide-lectures, or pseudo-documentaries. It is true that Rossellini makes use of documentary techniques: he mixes notations of typical behavior with depictions of particular historical incidents and gives careful attention to including accurate models of significant artifacts of the period. A true documentary, however, can only show existing conditions or present relations. Rossellini cannot—and does not wish to—resuscitate an individual or a period. Even when he uses the actual historical sites, these "real" locations serve primarily a formal purpose. They suggest the historical environment just as the actors suggest the historical individual. What Rossellini wishes to impress upon us is the pattern of the conflict between an individual and an environment.

*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, *Socrates*, *Blaise Pascal*, and *Augustine of Hippo* are intended to function both as educational documents and as moral suggestions. In them the genial accomplishments of Louis XIV, Socrates, Pascal, and Augustine provide an indication of the possibilities of individual attainment. Still, it is not the *fact*, but the *manner* of their genius which recommends the four men as educational models. They all confronted moral problems which recur, in similar form, in each generation. For Rossellini the purpose of education is to provide man with information which will increase his ability to cope effectively with obstacles and enable him to arrive at a positive resolution of life's inescapable quandaries. By identifying each of his protagonists with a general and recurring moral dilemma, Rossellini applies to moral education the technique, widespread in medicine and psychology, of the case history. *Blaise Pascal*, for instance, may be viewed as the objective illustration of the continuing tension between the famous mathematician's scientific abilities and his spiritual wants. But Pascal's particular need to reconcile physical constraints with ideal goals is one which typifies Western European man. Again the example of

SOCRATES



the past becomes a source of inspiration for the present.

Similar oppositions underlie the other three films. Augustine embodies Christian faith and hope during the collapse of civil authority. Socrates has always stood for individual freedom and rational analysis against the intolerance of political conservatism. Louis represents not only the modern centralized state against feudal dispersion, but the energy of new ideas in a time of anarchy. The four films lack the insistent moral tone of the early works, but their moral conclusions have become more powerful by taking on the persuasive subtlety of historical tradition.

To declare that the discovery of truth requires a moral point of view means to establish a relative scale of moral values. This does not mean necessary division into good and bad, but implies at least a progression from good to better. One may dispute the validity of Rossellini's moral hierarchy, but one cannot question its existence. Whether he is recording the modest heroism of the working class or probing the historical exaggerations which misshape minds, Rossellini demonstrates time and again that his admiration goes to those who strive. Man is ennobled by his willingness and his capacity to struggle. Rossellini undoubtedly sees the world in Catholic terms; many of his subjects are Catholic in tone and inspiration. But the qualities he sanc-

tions—energy, commitment, faith, intelligence—are universal. The Rossellini hero can come from any class, from any country. Near the end of *Augustine of Hippo*, Augustine speaks for all Rossellini's protagonists when he explains to his younger companion: "Life is like this road. We are free to do what we want while we walk along it, but we cannot change the direction of the road. To leave it is to fall into darkness. To turn back the same." Since there is no escape the best response is to press forward; all Rossellini's characters share this conviction. The flat narrative emphasizes the steady battle.

Characteristically the films do not cap the efforts of their protagonists with a personally rewarding "happy ending." Their achievements imprison them just as their genius dominates us. There is only death (Socrates, Pascal) or isolation accompanied by the intuition of death. Louis becomes the Sun King, the giver of life to all the nobility of France. But the final scene shows us the man, alone, closed up in his room pondering the effect of his victory. "Neither the sun nor death can be looked at fixedly." The close-up which concludes *Augustine of Hippo* shows Augustine standing in the pulpit, his arms and face raised toward God and the hope of salvation. If death were a defeat, they would all be failures. But death is not part of the problem; it is a given. As Don Pietro in *Open City* points out just before he is shot: "It is easy to



AGE OF THE  
MEDICIS

die well. What is difficult is to live well." The didactic films repeat that even though living well requires constant effort, it is a necessary exertion. The supreme immorality is to give up.

Although the films on genius are historically accurate, they are not intended to be exhaustive compilations. Rossellini leaves out important and interesting material: he never mentions Louis's religious intolerance (he revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and closed down the Jansenist convents in 1711, imprisoning members of the order) or Augustine's fervid persecution of the Donatists and the Aryans during his later years. But since it is the structure of a particular problem which takes his full interest, the selectivity of the films does not limit their significance. Rossellini emphasizes personal solutions in order to encourage understanding and imitation. For this reason the individual portrait, no matter how brightly colored with factual notations, is ideal in the sense that only one aspect of the person is considered. Louis XIV is a prime example. Two of his most remarkable traits in the film—the failure to consult with anyone and the absence of a smile—are historically inaccurate. But Rossellini merely emphasizes, by restricting his view of the king, the loneliness of responsibility, the strain of power and the single-minded force of the king's political consciousness. This sort of selectivity is obviously well-suited for creating an ideal image, but paradoxically, factual precision can contribute to an idealized portrait. Because Louis XIV was actually 5' 4" tall, Rossellini was careful to select a man the same height. The king's

brother and Fouquet were chosen the same way. But since the other actors are modern men and taller on the average than Louis's contemporaries, the king appears short—which emphasizes in a physical way the obstacles he had to overcome to impose his will. Rossellini has made Louis larger than life by shrinking him.

In spite of their innovative style, the films are far from attaining uniform excellence. The questionable practice of dubbing—particularly in *Socrates*, which was filmed in Spain with French, Spanish, and Italian actors and then post-synchronized in Italian—creates a discrepancy between voice and face, between words and lip movements which often detracts from the action. *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, on the other hand, shows what can be done with real voices and real faces. The sound is so perfect that much of it seems to have been recorded direct. The films which deal with Classical times are somewhat marred by unconvincing sets, although this deficiency is probably not so marked when the films are presented on television.

The four films, like all in the series, require much from us and occasionally impose on our patience, not to mention our good will. Each film is a precisely detailed surface on which we see paraded not the fullness of real life, but the linear abstraction of successive, interrelated events. Deliberate staging and measured pace lead us inexorably to the moral lessons which Rossellini has contained within each film. Like the great fresco painters, Rossellini seeks to make the past not only coherent, but useful.